

3 | The Politics of Camp:

Queering Parades, Performance, and the Public in Belfast

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Despite the recent resumption of the Northern Ireland Assembly and a recommitment of major political parties to working together on Northern Irish governance, and despite the public perception of increasing tolerance,¹ Northern Irish society would seem to be as divided as ever before. For instance, the number of 'peace lines'² dividing Protestant and Catholic housing areas doubled between 1995 and 2005, with most of the walls located in Belfast.³ As of 2006, 80% of people lived in 'single identity' communities.⁴ The Good Friday Agreement (1998) effectively reified the 'two-community' model of politics,⁵ and neither the subsequent St. Andrews Agreement nor the quotidian workings of politics has done much to unsettle this model.

Perhaps one of the most obvious and contentious displays of identity, particularly in post-ceasefire Northern Ireland, has been through parades. Parading peaks during the Orange marching season, which takes place every summer and is concentrated around the 12th of July in commemoration of William of Orange's 1690 victory at the Battle of the Boyne. After the violent confrontations and protests surrounding the Drumcree parade in Portadown, the Parades Commission was established in 1998 to monitor and regulate controversial parades.⁶ Parading, like self-imposed religious housing segregation, does not appear to have diminished; in 2005, for instance, the Parades Commission lists 391 Orange parades; in 2008, it lists 1334.

Parading is not limited, however, to loyalist and nationalist groups. 1991 saw the first Gay Pride parade in Belfast, and Belfast Pride has increased in the number of participants and observers ever since. Pride's popularity has certainly accompanied an increase in visibility of gays and lesbians and an increased recognition of the claims to rights by those identifying thus. Although Pride seems to offer yet another identity to add to the parade of identities in Northern Ireland, I would suggest a different reading of the yearly event, which takes place near the end of the summer 'marching season'. In the context of Northern Ireland, Belfast Pride proffers an alternative to the performance of 'identity' and 'tradition' represented by the loyalist and nationalist parades. Specifically, the Belfast Pride parade has camp elements, and camp in this public context provides an alternative to the entrenchment of identity and identity politics as well as to the public forms such politics take in Northern Ireland.

Making a New Camp

Richard Kirkland is the first critic to have, provocatively, brought the notion of camp to bear on Northern Irish cultural productions. He writes that

camp ... fulfils a number of important roles within bourgeois society. In exposing the shallowness of identitarian constructions of the self through a determined focus on the surfaces of their manifestation, it is a celebration of those identities while at the same time containing a more dangerous awareness of their ultimate interchangeability. Its intimacy with those codes, the profound knowledge of the society it demands, similarly allows for a demarcation of a culture while, as [Richard] Dyer reminds us, providing a mode of cultural survival in the face of real or imagined violence.⁷

He suggests that 'camp is ... transgressive of the limits by which identity normally offers itself' (130). And indeed, these descriptions echo the way camp functions in Belfast Pride. Those who practice camp within the parade are double-voiced, echoing the structures of the majority culture(s) while at the same time providing a comic commentary on them through parody.

Kirkland's analysis draws heavily on Susan Sontag's 'Notes on Camp', which he describes as 'one of the most vivid engagements with the concept' (Kirkland, 128) and to which I will return as well. He accepts Sontag's suggestion both that camp is an aesthetic

position and that what it responds to is 'instant character'.⁸ As such, 'camp ... seems to invite an actual commitment to identity's formal structures. In this way camp becomes an unlikely ally, if not of identity itself, then at least to the symmetries and oppositions on which it is dependent' (Kirkland, 130). Kirkland's notion of camp is also heavily indebted to Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity.⁹ For Kirkland, 'camp becomes indicative of an over-determined identity formation' (127). By the time he engages in close reading of 'camp' formations (which he characterizes as belonging to one of three 'forms': dissenting camp, unionist camp, and nationalist camp), camp has become a 'spectacular critique (a critique *through* spectacle) of the earnest values it wishes to promote' (135). For Kirkland, camp is unintentional parody, parody through excess, parody through failed repetition *à la* Butler. Although he acknowledges that camp is often seen as 'highly conscious', his examples – of, for instance, Ian Paisley performing the role of Protestant martyr in the Crumlin Road jail, or the contradictions between didacticism and sentimental self-regard in Bernadette Devlin's autobiography – suggest a notion of camp that, following Sontag, is 'pure Camp': a 'seriousness that fails' (Sontag, 59) that is then identified (and in Sontag's vision, but not Kirkland's, 'redeemed') by its audience as camp.

The idea that nationalist and loyalist, as well as 'dissenting' (expressly non-aligned, liberal humanist), discourses and forms are worthy objects of camp appropriation is, it seems to me, an important contribution to thinking about Northern Irish political discourse. However, Kirkland's identification of what constitutes camp in the Northern Irish context and how it works, I might suggest, would be unrecognizable to most practitioners of camp. It is important to explain his failures of understanding of camp in order to reclaim what I find more valuable about Kirkland's contribution.

The first and most obvious critique of Kirkland is that he erases homosexuality almost entirely from his discussion of camp even as he relies on gay critics such as Dyer for his elaboration of the concept. In a footnote, Kirkland writes that 'it is necessary to place Dyer's cheerful analysis in the context of other more militant reclamations of camp by queer theory', citing as an example Moe Meyer's claim that camp 'embodies a specifically queer cultural discourse' and that the un-queer have no access to camp except through appropriation (Kirkland, 181). Indeed, Sontag's famed essay has itself been critiqued as being appropriative of homosexual

discourse, taking a homosexual cultural practice and suggesting it as a more general aesthetic response; in contrast, Esther Newton's study *Mother Camp* can be seen, as Fabio Cleto points out, as a text that gives camp 'a stable referent': 'the sensibility/taste described by Newton is no longer the Sontagian sign and expression of an era, but rather an exercise in homosexual taste and a mode of existence'.¹⁰ I will stake my tent and suggest that camp, at least for the majority of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, is a queer phenomenon.

Why queer? Certainly camp, as many critics have suggested, has been closely tied to male homosexual culture in particular, whether or not the concept actually originated there (Cleto, 21). But more to the point, as Cleto suggests in his analysis of the instability of the origins and meaning of both 'camp' and 'queer', queer, like camp, is a destabilizing discourse, and indeed, as he suggests, both are 'cognate terms: camp is queer as a mode of being, as posturing a body, as a modality of distribution within social spaces and within the economy of the social contract, and as a mode of communication ...' (30).

This list is evocative, but it still does not explain why Kirkland's use of camp as an analytical category fails. Camp is, to be sure, notoriously difficult to write about. I would offer that critics – and by no means is Kirkland alone, given that scholars of camp seem to have as many definitions of camp as a drag queen has sequins – have trouble defining camp because they cannot decide where the camp actually lies: in the object, in the reception, in the 'sensibility' or aesthetics, in the worldview, or in the performance. I will add my sequins to the dress with the following attempts at clarification.

First, camp always involves a performance. It can be a performance of reception of an object or person. This is how the Queen Mother can be a camp icon (an example used by Richard Dyer¹¹ and cited by Kirkland [134]): she is not innately camp, and indeed no *object or person* is, but one can perform a response to her that claims her as camp. Of course, other performances are both more obviously camp and more obviously performances, like drag. Camp, in short, is not 'performative' in the Butlerian sense of a discourse that forms a subject through reiteration; it is, rather, *performance* by a knowing agent. It is an active choice. Sontag cites Wilde in *An Ideal Husband*: 'To be natural is such a difficult pose to keep up' (Sontag, 58). The camp performer recognizes the performance, the pose, *as* performance. Esther Newton, and several

critics after her refer to this aspect of camp as its theatricality,¹² and it is important, I think, to distinguish deliberate theatricality from agentless performativity.

Second, the performance of camp, whether that performance is a response to an object as 'fabulous' or a Celine Dion song sung in drag or the hosting of a Pee-Wee Herman pyjama party, is necessarily part of an exchange. It is dialogic; camp does not happen in isolation. Sedgwick evokes this sense of camp in her discussion of camp-recognition, as opposed to kitsch-attribution:

Camp [as distinguished from kitsch] seems to involve a gayer and more spacious angle of view ... Unlike kitsch-attribution, then, camp-recognition doesn't ask, 'What kind of debased creature could possibly be the right audience for this spectacle?' Instead, it says *what if*: What if the right audience for this were exactly *me*? What if, for instance, the resistant, oblique, tangential investments of attention and attraction that I am able to bring to this spectacle are actually uncannily a response to the resistant, oblique, tangential investments of the person, or of some of the people, who created it? And what if, furthermore, others whom I don't know or recognize can see it from the same 'perverse' angle? Unlike kitsch-attribution, the sensibility of camp-recognition always sees that it is dealing in reader relations and in projective fantasy (projective though not infrequently true) about the spaces and practices of cultural production.¹³

I do not believe that Sedgwick is suggesting that the 'recognition' of camp is a 'recognition' of anything innate, but rather a recognition, a re-thinking, from a 'perverse' (or *queer*) angle of view. To recognize camp, one must be part of a discourse, an exchange; one must be hailed by camp. This dynamic can also be understood in the context of public sphere theory, to which I will return. It is also the very reason both Sontag and Kirkland may partially fail in their analysis in different ways: Kirkland sympathetically cites Sontag's claim that 'to name a sensibility, to draw its contours and to recount its history, requires a deep sympathy modified by revulsion' (Sontag, 53, cited in Kirkland, 135). The 'revulsion' experience implies that neither Sontag nor Kirkland really identifies with the 'resistant, oblique, tangential investments of the person, or of some of the people, who [create] camp' (Sedgwick, 156).

Third, camp involves a seeming paradox in that it is simultaneously exclusive and potentially inclusive. It is exclusive insofar as it is a response of the marginalized to their marginal

status that preserves, reclaims, and refigures that status, but only by those who are sympathetic. Further, if one is not hailed by camp, if one does not recognize a fellow-feeling in camp as Sedgwick suggests, then one is appropriating the discourse. The parallel might be in the use of 'dyke' or 'nigger': if one is not hailed by those terms in their reclaimed context, one cannot safely use the terms without condescension. In this sense, camp performs as a counter-public discourse, as Michael Warner defines the concept. It

maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public but a dominant one ... The discourse that constitutes it is not merely a different or alternative idiom but one that in other contexts would be regarded with hostility.¹⁴

In this sense, I might also suggest that camp occupies a discursive space both inside and outside the dominant culture: with one foot inside the culture enough to know it and care about, and another foot outside, able to see with the critical (and parodic) view of the marginalized.

Perhaps most importantly, however – and this is where Kirkland's analysis misses the sense of camp in practice utterly – camp is funny. Whether the laughter is with *or* at the camp performance, camp is meant to engender laughter. And in that, it has the potential to be inclusive and even, as Sontag implies, generous. The use of humour in response to the conflict in Northern Ireland is by no means a new approach; one can name many artists, such as Stewart Parker, Robert McLiam Wilson, and Paul Muldoon who, in different ways, have incorporated humour, albeit often of a dark sort, in their work. But the playful and good-humoured public parody that Pride's camp performances enact of the actual signs and structures of the conflict – from identity to parading to flags – is both a novel approach *and* a political one, despite Sontag's (in)famous assertion that 'comedy is an experience of under-involvement, of detachment', and that the 'camp sensibility' is, 'it goes without saying', 'disengaged, depoliticized – or at least apolitical' (Sontag, 54). As Caryl Flinn notes, most critics would not agree with Sontag's sentiments here, instead 'adher[ing] to the basic belief in camp's ability to unmoor dominant ideological structures and values – not an apolitical act, to be sure'.¹⁵ Camp's ability to unmoor is located in its exploitation of excess for comic effect – excessive seriousness, excessive feathers, excessive sentiment.

Excess reveals the form for what it is: form, not nature, not inevitability. In the context of a Northern Irish political environment in which 'two community' rhetoric has become ever more entrenched, such destabilization of supposed inevitabilities is essential for the political health of the region.

Camping in Belfast

Belfast's gay pride parade has been taking place since 1991, growing from a small parade (or 'dander', as early organizer and long-time officer of the Northern Ireland Gay Rights Association, PA MagLochlainn, has always preferred to call it), attended by gay rights supporters from Belfast as well as London/Derry, Dublin, Cork, and elsewhere, to a large multi-event celebration known as Belfast Pride. Pride culminates with a parade comprising hundreds of participants, from individuals to organized groups and Belfast gay-friendly businesses. Even from the beginning, some Belfast Pride participants, like Pride parade-goers in many parts of the world, engaged in camp performance and fancy dress costuming. In recent years, elements of the parade have run the gamut from the high seriousness of human rights activism to the camp performances of drag queens, parade floats, dancers, and costumes, quite often accompanied by amplified disco music.

One might argue that the camp performances are at odds with serious activism, but I would argue that the effect is otherwise: the camp performances help the diverse audience of Pride accept with equanimity the other messages the parade offers. Camp delivers politics with a smile and a wink – an approach that, as I have suggested elsewhere, has been part of an effective strategy of address both to the queer counter public and to the wider public to which the parade is addressed.¹⁶

Pride has more obviously had a political impact as part of a larger lesbian and gay rights discourse, but its various strategies of address – including camp – impact more with lesbians and gays or the larger queer counter public that the parade addresses.¹⁷ I have argued that one of the ways Pride challenges Northern Irish politics is through a reversal of the surveillance gaze to which all Northern Irish people are subject:

This returned gaze is not a mere recapitulation of the politics of surveillance, but rather an exposure, literal and figurative, of the economy of surveillance: to turn a camera on a protester is

to say that queers are subjects with a gaze as much as they are objects of it. Mostly, the parade says 'watch us', changing the very nature of that watching through the strategic assumption that the parade audience is a mostly sympathetic, open-minded public.¹⁸

But Pride not only turns the gaze back on the viewers, as I have argued elsewhere; the returned gaze creates a dialogue. In concert with the camp performances in particular, the Pride parade invites participation from its audience and is apparently so effective in this invitation that 'the borders of the parade are remarkably fluid; many members of the audience become marchers'.¹⁹ It is perhaps this dialogism – and humour – that allows the parade participants so effectively to 'camp up' some of the sacred cows of Northern Irish political life such as political flags, parading, and parade counter-protests (see figs. 1 and 2). Although these elements are not the focus of the parade, their presence both signals that Pride is part of the political culture and is performing a critique of it, seeing mainstream culture from the particular 'perverse' angle of view that Sedgwick celebrates.

One of the more contentious elements of Northern Irish visible political culture, for instance, is the display of flags; such displays have been the focus of much political discussion, negotiation, anger, and resistance in Northern Ireland.²⁰ It has also been the subject of camp performance in Belfast Pride: not simply satire, not protest, but the particular combination of affection, knowledge, humour, excess and critique that camp can produce. The camp humour of gay boys and girls in white jeans and white shirts and brightly coloured cowboy hats holding a Union Jack where the blue has been replaced by pink both deflates the high seriousness of Northern Irish obsession with flags and exhibits, presumably, some level of affection for that obsession (see fig. 3). Who knew that the Union Jack could be fabulous if it were just a bit pinker? The same can be said of the giant rainbow flag that runs the length of a city block (see fig. 4), used in other Pride celebrations but taking on a particular resonance in a Northern Irish context. 'You call that [tricolour or Union Jack] a flag? THIS is a flag,' it seems to say. It, like the empinkened Union Jack, celebrates the form while perverting the content.

Conclusion

Camp is no mere repetition of form to the point of unconscious parody, as Kirkland suggests. Nor is it, on the other extreme, merely postmodern ironic positioning; it is not nihilistic. It is, I might suggest, a politics of affection, even when the satiric knife may cut a bit deeply. And camp humour in the context of a public parade, I would suggest, offers 'different ways of imagining stranger sociability and its reflexivity', as Warner describes the queer counter public (Warner, 122); it 'challenges the limits of public space and the place of the body in that space' (Conrad, 'Queering', 601). It does this through performing the same forms to which people are accustomed, but in a different way, one that draws the audience into dialogue and which has the potential to reposition those who are in dialogue with it, to allow them to see things they take for granted from a different perspective. And in so doing, it betrays what Sontag gestures toward when she says that 'camp taste is a kind of love, love for human nature' (Sontag, 65).

By turning an exclusive form of address outward to a larger public, the camp elements of Belfast Pride seem to suggest, in the paradox that is peculiar to camp, that we can all partake of this exclusive form. It gestures to shared forms that ossify identities, cultures, practices, communities, traditions, and politics, empties them of their high seriousness, and provides a different perspective and an opportunity for a different path. I remain hopeful that more and more people will find themselves hailed by camp and in so doing seek a more generous and 'perverse' angle of view on Northern Irish politics.

My thanks to Darryl Wadsworth and Robert Lachance for their insight and contributions to my thinking about camp.

¹ *Northern Ireland Life & Times Survey: Community Relations*, 2007. See <http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2007/CommunityRelations/index.html> (accessed 24 November 2008).

² high dividing walls, also called 'interfaces'.

³ John O' Farrell, 'Apartheid', *New Statesman* 28 November 2005. See <http://www.newstatesman.com/200511280006> (accessed 20 November 2008).

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- ⁴ John Kampfner, 'Divided in Peace', *New Statesman* 20 November 2006. See <http://www.newstatesman.com/200611200028> (accessed 20 November 2008).
- ⁵ For analysis of the implications of the language of the Good Friday Agreement, see especially Dominic Bryan, 'The politics of community', *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 9.4 (December 2006), pp. 603-17; Kathryn Conrad, *Locked in the Family Cell: Gender, Sexuality, and Political Agency in Irish National Discourse* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), chapter 3; Alan Finlayson, 'Culture, politics and cultural politics in Northern Ireland', *New Formations* 43 (2001), pp. 87-102; and Kathryn Conrad, 'Queering Community', *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 9.4 (December 2006), pp. 589-602.
- ⁶ See Northern Ireland Parades Commission website, <http://www.paradescommission.org> (accessed 24 November 2008). For more analysis of Orange parades and the nationalist and loyalist parading traditions of Northern Ireland more generally, see Dominic Bryan, *Orange Parades: The Politics of Ritual, Tradition, and Control* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000); Neil Jarman, *Material Conflicts: Parades and Visual Displays in Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Berg, 1997); Jarman and Dominic Bryan, *Parade and Protest: A Discussion of Parading Disputes in Northern Ireland* (Coleraine: Centre for the Study of Conflict, University of Ulster, Coleraine, 1996); and the Conflict Archive on the Internet (CAIN), <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/index.html> (accessed 20 November 2008).
- ⁷ Richard Kirkland, *Identity Parades: Northern Irish Culture and Dissident Subjects* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2002), p. 130. Subsequent references will be cited in the text.
- ⁸ Susan Sontag, 'Notes on Camp', *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 60. Subsequent references will be cited in the text. Cited in Kirkland, 129.
- ⁹ See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and Routledge: Routledge, 1999).
- ¹⁰ Fabio Cleto, Introduction, Cleto, *Camp*, p. 89. Subsequent references will be cited in the text.
- ¹¹ Richard Dyer, 'It's Being So Camp As Keeps Us Going', Cleto, *Camp*, p. 113.
- ¹² Esther Newton, 'Role Models', Cleto, *Camp*, p. 103.
- ¹³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), p. 156; emphasis in the original. Subsequent references will be cited in the text.

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- ¹⁴ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), p. 119. Subsequent references will be cited in the text. For a fuller discussion of Belfast Pride, read both in the context of public sphere theory and Northern Irish politics, see Conrad, 2006.
- ¹⁵ Caryl Flinn, 'The Deaths of Camp', Cleto, *Camp*, p. 439.
- ¹⁶ Conrad, 'Queering Community', p. 601. Subsequent references will be cited in the text.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ For a fuller discussion of the significance of flags, see Dominic Bryan and Gillian McIntosh, 'Sites of Creation and Conflict in Northern Ireland', *SAIS Review* 25.3 (2005), pp. 127-37. See also CAIN.



Figure 1: Photo: No Talk, No Walk/Re-route the Flute graffiti, Ormeau Road, Belfast, July 1998.



Figure 2: Photo: *You Won't Reroute This Fruit!* sign, Pride Parade participant, Belfast, August 2004.



Figure 3: Photo: Belfast Sightseeing Bus with Kremlin gay bar employees and pink, red and white Union Jack, Belfast Pride, 2006.



Figure 4: Photo: Giant rainbow flag, Belfast Pride, 2006.